

## **BURMA**

### U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom: 2013 Annual Report

**Bottom Line:** Ongoing political reforms have yet to significantly improve the situation for freedom of religion and belief. Sectarian violence and severe abuses of religious freedom and human dignity targeting ethnic minority Christians and Muslims continue to occur with impunity.

Ongoing and important political reforms in Burma have yet to significantly improve the situation for freedom of religion and belief. During the reporting period (January 2012 – January 2013), most religious freedom violations occurred against ethnic minority Christian and Muslim communities. Serious abuses against mainly Christian civilians occurred during military interventions in Kachin State and sectarian violence by societal actors targeting Muslims in Rakhine (Arakan) State. Buddhist monks suspected of anti-government activities also were detained or removed from their pagodas, and at least eight monks remain imprisoned for participating in peaceful demonstrations. In addition to sometimes severe restrictions on worship, education, and other religious activities and ceremonies, religious groups continue to face a range of problems including: pervasive surveillance, imprisonment, discrimination, societal violence, destruction or desecration of property, and censorship of religious materials.

USCIRF continues to recommend that Burma again be designated as a “country of particular concern” in 2013. The State Department has designated Burma as a CPC since 1999.

### **Background**

The Burmese government in the past year took important steps which the United States and other governments praised. Former general Thein Sein’s government released hundreds of political and religious prisoners including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, eased some internet and media controls, signed a tentative cease-fire with the Karen ethnic group, and scheduled parliamentary by-elections in which Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) party participated.

However, these reforms have not yet improved religious freedom conditions. Burma’s overall human rights record remains poor and the government was either unable or unwilling to curtail security forces or social actors who engaged in serious abuses against religious minorities and others during armed conflicts in ethnic minority areas or during sectarian violence targeting Muslims. Rohingya Muslims, who are denied Burmese citizenship, experience widespread discrimination, strict controls over their religious activities and ceremonies, and societal violence that often is incited by Buddhist monks and carried out with impunity by mobs and local militias, including police in Rakhine (Arakan) State. In the past year, over 1,000 Rohingya have been killed, their villages and religious structures destroyed, and women raped during attacks. Local militias and police sometimes block humanitarian assistance to destitute camps. There are reports of murders and property destruction that continue with impunity. In Kachin and northern Shan states, home to large Christian minority populations, the military conducted large operations beginning in January 2013. The military reportedly continues to limit religious worship and forcibly promote Buddhism as a means of pacification in these areas and targets Christians for forced labor, rape, intimidation, and destruction of religious sites. The government also continues to censor religious publications and prohibits the import of Bibles and Qu’rans in indigenous languages. Released prisoners face harassment and restrictions, including U Gambria, the head of the All-Burma Monks Alliance.

### **Religious Freedom Conditions**

***Ongoing Repression of Buddhists:*** The government controls Buddhist clergy (sangha), who are subject to a strict code of conduct that reportedly is enforced through criminal penalties. The government closely monitors monasteries viewed as focal points of anti-government activity and has restricted usual religious practices in

these areas. Monks perceived to be protest organizers have been charged under vague national security provisions, including “creating public alarm;” “engaging in activities inconsistent with and detrimental to Buddhism;” “the deliberate and malicious...outraging of religious feelings;” and “engaging in prohibited acts of speech intended for religious beliefs.” In February 2012, Ashin Pyinna Thiha, the abbot of Sardu Pariyatti Monastery, was banned from giving sermons because he was considered too “political.” In December 2012, after he met with Secretary of State Clinton, the Buddhist leadership and the Religious Affairs Ministry dismissed him from his monastery.

***Burmese and Rohingya Muslims:*** Muslims in Rakhine (Arakan) state, and particularly those of the Rohingya minority group, continued to experience the most severe forms of legal, economic, religious, educational, and social discrimination.

In June 2012, sectarian violence between ethnic Arakanese Buddhists and ethnic Rohingya Muslims led to hundreds of deaths and an estimated 100,000 internally displaced. Provincial police did not stop initial violence and supported ongoing attacks by both Arakanese groups and Buddhist monks on Rohingya villages and the denial of humanitarian access to Rohingya areas and camps. In October, sectarian violence erupted again in dozens of coordinated attacks that resulted in beatings, deaths, rapes, the destruction of entire villages, and additional displacement of Rohingya. Rohingya asylum seekers have been turned away from Bangladesh and Thailand, including being forcibly pushed back to sea by Thai military forces. Untold numbers have died attempting to seek refuge in these countries.

The government denies citizenship to Rohingyas. Without citizenship, Rohingyas lack access to secondary education in state-run schools, cannot be issued government identification cards (essential to receiving government benefits), and face restrictions on freedoms of religion, association, and movement. In some areas, Muslims were allowed to gather for worship and religious training only during major Muslim holidays. The government recently ordered the destruction of mosques, religious centers, and schools. In March 2012, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma again reported to the UN Human Rights Council on the systematic and endemic discrimination faced by the Muslim community, which has led to the denial of their basic and fundamental human rights. About 300,000 Muslim Rohingyas live, often in squalid conditions, in refugee camps in Bangladesh, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries, and face discrimination, trafficking, and other hardships.

***Abuses Targeting Ethnic Minority Christians:*** Christian groups in ethnic minority regions, where low-intensity conflicts have been waged for decades, face particularly severe and ongoing religious freedom abuses. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights in Burma, Tomas Quintana, has highlighted in his reports the discrimination against religious and ethnic minority groups by the Burmese military and continued by the civilian government, including policies preventing the teaching of minority languages in schools and restrictions on freedom of religion or belief. His 2012 report contains evidence of severe religious freedom abuses against ethnic minority Kachin and Chin, including restrictions on the building of places of worship, destruction of religious venues and artifacts, prohibitions on some religious ceremonies, and the policy of coerced conversions to Buddhism at the government’s “National Races Youth Development Training Schools,” where Buddhist monks were reported to be working together with the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

### **Recommendations for U.S. Policy**

U.S. leadership is essential to ensuring the full transition to democratic rule, ending human rights violations, and advancing religious freedom and the rule of law in Burma. The United States also should maintain support for targeted sanctions until benchmarks set by both the U.S. Congress and the UN Special Rapporteur for Burma are fully met. The Obama administration and/or the Congress should make recommendations for the targeted delivery of economic assistance and direct investments in Burma, focusing some non-humanitarian assistance to ethnic minority areas and prohibiting investments with those individuals or entities implicated in major human rights violations. In addition, the administration and/or Congress should consider creating specific benchmarks for the Burmese government to meet or face the gradual re-imposition of sanctions already lifted, including

some import and export bans and opposition to assessment missions and loans from international financial institutions.

In addition to maintaining the CPC designation for Burma, the U.S. government should:

- Encourage the reform process in Burma by targeting ethnic minority areas for some political and economic development assistance and providing clear benchmarks for the Burmese government to meet or face re-imposition of some of the sanctions already lifted. Such benchmarks should include:
  - The unconditional release of all religious and political prisoners;
  - An immediate nationwide ceasefire with religious and ethnic minorities;
  - A durable citizenship solution for Rohingya Muslims;
  - Accountability for state or non-state actors who perpetrated acts of violence against religious and ethnic minorities;
  - The reform of laws limiting religious freedom and other human rights and end to discriminatory policies that result in the closure of religious minority places of worship, the inability to repair structures, and the censorship of religious materials; and
  - The holding of free and fair elections in 2015;
- Provide technical assistance to empower Burmese civil society groups organizing humanitarian assistance, refugee protections, conducting human rights documentation efforts (particularly of religious freedom abuses faced by the Muslim, Christian, and Buddhist communities), and providing public advocacy, leadership, and legal training to Burmese living in and outside of Burma;
- Coordinate economic support and technical assistance programs with other donors, including with governments and non-governmental actors, in order to avoid duplicative programs and to work toward similar goals of permanent democratization, the rule of law, the integration of ethnic minority communities, refugee protections, unimpeded humanitarian aid delivery, and human rights protections; and,
- consider creating a pilot program as an Asian counterpart to the Supporting Eastern European Democracy (SEED) program called the Promoting Universal Rights and Rule of Law (PURRL) program to support the development of nascent political parties and democratic institutions, and provide technical assistance to civilian government agencies, legal entities, courts, and the parliament to build support for democracy and revise laws that restrict religious freedom, discriminate against ethnic and religious minorities, and limit the freedoms of expression and association.

**Please see USCIRF's 2013 Annual Report for a more extensive review and recommendations on Burma.**